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This article proposes to highlight some of the paradoxes inherent in the image of Racine that Voltaire helped to establish. It seeks to identify those features of Racine's diverse and complex tragedies that he admired, criticized, or neglected. It examines how Voltaire exploited this "Racine" for polemical purposes, and points to some of the consequences of the stance he adopted, such as that in setting up this iconic model, he inadvertently ensured its downfall.

The question thus defined, two other, interlinked questions arise. Does the subject deserve this treatment? In addition, has this topic not already been given its day in court, and by eminent Voltaire specialists into the bargain?

This second question suggests a response to the first. The subject does, after all, concern the interpretation of France's greatest tragic dramatist by the man who towered over the eighteenth-century literary scene, and took up Racine's mantle as tragic dramatist. The influence exerted by Voltaire's establishment of his "Racine" as a model and a monument is important for an appreciation of pre-and post-Romantic aesthetics, and for the establishment of the literary canon. Small wonder, then, that his view of Racine has attracted critical attention.<sup>1</sup>

The very existence of these studies brings us back to the second question: why revisit the same material? The main reason is one of focus. Voltaire's take on Racine has tended to be seen in an eighteenth-century perspective, and quite understandably so: Voltaire's comments provide clues to his aesthetic principles and dramatic practice, and are a reliable gauge of his mounting intolerance to what he saw as a national regression from the good taste that prevailed in the second half of the seventeenth century. This focus, however, can involve a degree of anachronism. One example is the widespread use, in relation to Racine's plays, of the term

“classical”, despite the fact that the notion is an eighteenth-century creation, and that the age of Louis XIV never saw itself as such.<sup>2</sup> Another example is the idea that artistic creation in the seventeenth century, in the words of David Williams, ‘was seen largely in terms of certain preconceived theories and notions’, supposedly in defiance of Aristotle’s aesthetic principles on the primacy of pleasure, despite the witness and practice of all those, such as Corneille and Racine, who sought above all else to please audiences and readers.<sup>3</sup> This eighteenth-century perspective does, in addition, pose one major problem: the implicit acceptance of “Racine” as an object endowed with certain specific, well-defined, and uncontroversial qualities, such as simplicity, order, rationality, and harmony. This, of course, is how Voltaire saw Racine. But this image necessarily underplays a fact of history, that Racine's tragedies were ‘a series of individual works composed for different reasons, and according to different criteria, to satisfy different public expectations at different times’.<sup>4</sup> It is too easily forgotten that Racine was a practical playwright whose prime purpose was to give pleasure to an audience. He did so by working on its emotions in a series of well-plotted dramatic experiences that have always been alive to reinvention and reinterpretation. “Racine” was a later creation, and one of its principal architects was Voltaire. In other words, something of Voltaire's own image of Racine tends to be implicitly accepted by commentators. In seeking to assess the validity and coherence of this image, this article will therefore measure it against the evidence of Racine's plays themselves, in their diversity, rather than against some static, unified entity that critics too easily call “Racine”, as Voltaire himself did.

One way of approaching this subject is to follow some of the paradoxes that it seems to present. The first concerns Voltaire's well-known admiration for Racine, which only intensified as the glory days of the *Roi soleil* faded into the distance. While labelling Racine and Boileau ‘des jansénistes ridicules’ (D13296), he professed himself to be ‘idolâtre de Racine’ (D11041). In

his letters alone he makes over five hundred references to his predecessor, often reaching for the word ‘perfection’ (D11125).<sup>5</sup> Many of his comments are on a scale that goes from blanket approval to unreserved hero-worship: ‘Je ne connais point une bonne pièce depuis Racine, et aucune avant lui, où il n’y ait d’horribles défauts’ (D 11041). The paradox is that the admiration stopped here. It did not inspire Voltaire to give Racine’s plays, *Iphigénie* excepted, any detailed critical attention: his notes on *Bérénice* have a mainly linguistic focus, and his scattered comments on *Athalie* are often the occasion for a polemic on fanaticism.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, Arnold Ages notes that in the correspondence Voltaire frequently quotes lines from Corneille, but rarely from Racine.<sup>7</sup> And just as paradoxically, his scant regard for most of Corneille’s plays did not prevent him from embarking on an ambitious series of commentaries on them, even though this tedious work only intensified his negative sentiments, as his letters amply testify. This begs an obvious question: why did Voltaire not write on Racine’s tragedies in a more sustained way, instead of engaging in the prolonged self-torture by boredom involved in writing the *Commentaires sur Corneille*? Was it because he could engage in an adversarial way with Corneille, as with Shakespeare, whereas Racine’s art often left him defenceless, and almost speechless? He was certainly overawed by the manner in which Racine’s verse delivered a high emotional charge with great formal restraint, elegance, and simplicity: ‘C’est le comble de l’insolence de faire une tragédie après ce grand homme [...] Il est dur de sentir la perfection, et de n’y pouvoir atteindre’ (D 11042). Whatever the reason, in his role as a literary critic faced with Racine’s plays, Voltaire often seemed to throw in the towel.

A symptom is the ease with which he followed received opinions about Racine that were current from the late seventeenth century. He was aware that nothing was easier than to rehearse commonplaces, however false, as he judged La Bruyère’s celebrated portrait to be (D9959).<sup>8</sup> Yet his own “Racine” does not stray far from the very triteness he condemns, and this from early on,

in *Le Temple du gout*, where he depicts ‘le tendre Racine’ as ‘parlant au coeur de plus près’ (*OC* 9, p. 200). In *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, for example, he presents Racine as far surpassing all the playwrights who came before him ‘dans l’intelligence des passions’ (M.xiv.548), depicting him as ‘le poète de l’univers qui a le mieux connu le cœur humain’ (M.xv.45). Similarly, Voltaire often expressed another traditional reason for admiring Racine, the emotional hold he exercised: ‘Quel homme que ce Jean Racine, comme il va au cœur toujours tout droit!’ (D15126). Mme de Sévigné had famously talked of the handkerchiefs needed to watch *Andromaque*, and for Voltaire the way Racine sometimes brought tears to the eyes was ‘un art au-dessus du sublime’.<sup>9</sup> That the opinions Voltaire expressed were already common currency does not, of course, in some way invalidate them. But it is surprising that this sharpest of all critics, faced with his favourite writer, should not have ventured further than he did. Voltaire on Racine is, of course, always enjoyable to read, because Voltaire is Voltaire: intelligent, cultured, clear, concise, and witty. Those seeking original insights on Racine’s tragedies, however, will generally be disappointed.

This conformity leads to a related paradox: the coexistence of Voltaire’s admiration for “Racine” with a series of highly unfavourable judgements on his plays, which often again reiterate critical commonplaces, such as that ‘tous ces amants se ressemblent un peu trop’ (*OC* 9, p. 174).<sup>10</sup> It is true that Arnold Ages was able to find only five instances of ‘real criticism of Racine’ in the whole of the correspondence.<sup>11</sup> In his other writings, however, Voltaire did not shy from pointing out what he thought were weaknesses in Racine’s plays. It is true that these criticisms moderated from 1760 onwards, when his encounters with Corneille gave a renewed lustre to Racine, and when the growing popularity of Shakespeare made “Racine” a precious ally in the war against encroaching barbarity.<sup>12</sup> That said, one complaint that remained constant, and indeed was expressed in the *Commentaires sur Corneille*, was that Racine’s tragedies were not tragic enough: ‘C’est avec raison qu’on a nommé Racine le poète des femmes. Ce n’est pas là du

vrai tragique' (*OC* 55, p. 951). Thus *Alexandre* was a 'faible tragédie' (*OC* 55, pp. 679); *Mithridate* was unfit for purpose as a tragedy because based on sexual jealousy, and, moreover, 'un vieillard jaloux de ses deux enfants est un vrai personnage de comédie' (*ibid.*, p. 968); the construction of *Bérénice* was deemed unworthy of the tragic genre, 'jusqu'au ridicule' (D9959), since it was 'une pastorale cent fois moins tragique que les scènes intéressantes de *Pastor fido*' (*OC* 31A, p. 405); and *Esther* was 'une aventure sans intérêt et sans vraisemblance' (M.xiv.475). Voltaire's objection could be to a part that he perceived as weakening the whole: in *Bajazet*, the foppish diction of the eponymous hero (D1966), or in *Andromaque* 'quelques scènes de coquetteries et d'amour' (*OC* 55, p. 1049). Thus, for example, he hailed *Britannicus* as 'la pièce des connaisseurs', but wondered if it was really a tragedy, and pointed to structural failings, feeble characters, and unseemly elements (*OC* 55, pp. 939-40); the heroine of *Phèdre* was given unstinting praise, but other characters in the play were found too weak, too French, or just not tragic enough (M.xvii.406); and even *Athalie*, a personal favourite, was criticized for the dangerous example of religious intolerance given by the High Priest (*OC* 66, p. 513). Only *Iphigénie* escaped censure, with the caveat that, along with *Phèdre*, 'il y a moins de défauts contre l'art que dans aucune autre' (M.xxv.227). David Williams has opined that Voltaire needed to make such criticisms because 'le génie de Racine était tellement sublime qu'il courait le risque d'être un modèle dangereux'.<sup>13</sup> Whatever the hypothesis advanced, it is a fact that the oft-proclaimed admiration for "Racine" coexists in Voltaire with a less than enthusiastic response to major elements of many of Racine's plays.

Lying in wait here is a further paradox. This concerns Voltaire's well-documented scorn for the practice, for which Racine was famous or infamous, of mixing tragic drama and love-intrigue: 'c'est une coquetterie continuelle; une simple comédie' (*OC* 30A, p. 155). Indeed, the first reason Voltaire gave for *Athalie* being 'le chef-d'œuvre de l'esprit humain' was that its

author had managed to ‘trouver le secret de faire en France une tragédie intéressante sans amour’ (OC 66, p. 505). Racine just had to grow up: ‘Ce ne fut qu’à l’âge plus mûr que cet homme éloquent comprit qu’il était capable de mieux faire’ (OC 31A, p. 405). Voltaire viewed this “love” as undermining the tragic genre, and Racine’s surrender to *galanterie* always remained a subject of censure. In *Phèdre*, for example, he found it ill-fitting that characters should give lessons on love, as though in a courtly romance (OC 30A, p. 151). And two famous lines from *Bérénice* (‘Depuis cinq ans entiers chaque jour je la vois, | Et crois toujours la voir pour la première fois’, ll. 545-46), are found ‘beaux’, ‘si naturels et si tendres’, but at the same time ‘ne seraient point du tout déplacés dans le haut comique’ (OC 33, p. 118). Yes, ‘un homme de goût’ could find good things in these works, but there was a substantial caveat:

Le même homme verra dans Racine de la faiblesse et de l’uniformité dans quelques caractères; de la galanterie, et quelquefois de la coquetterie même; des déclarations d’amour qui tiennent de l’idylle et de l’élégie plutôt que d’une grande passion théâtrale. (OC 38, p. 347)

This viewpoint reflects a current of opinion that had been commonly expressed for many decades before. It is rational, coherent, and is reinforced by Voltaire's own practice as a tragic dramatist. The paradox is not just that, from an admirer, it seems to strike at the dramatic basis of most of Racine’s tragedies, but that it espouses the opinions and dramatic practice of the derided Corneille.<sup>14</sup> In 1667, Racine's first great success, *Andromaque*, based on a series of volatile and unreciprocated love-relationships, at a stroke had seemed to make Corneille’s heroic tragedies look ponderous, stilted, and old-fashioned. Corneille had reacted impatiently: ‘J’ai cru jusques ici que l’amour était une passion trop chargée de faiblesse pour être la dominante dans une pièce héroïque. [...]. Nos doucereux et nos enjoués sont de contraire avis.’<sup>15</sup> Such biting sarcasm at

Racine's expense could have come from Voltaire's own pen, and indeed did. And yet this is the same Corneille most of whose plays Voltaire could hardly bear reading, even though the heroic rhetoric and weighty maxims that he mocked spring naturally, in these tragedies, from a dramatic action rooted in those very political, ethical, and personal conflicts that he judged to be more appropriate than Racine's *galanterie* to the seriousness of the tragic genre. Additional irony is provided by the fact that Voltaire's perspective on love and tragedy was shared by others, such as Saint-Evremond and the Jesuit Father Rapin, whom he was in general only too ready to ridicule.<sup>16</sup>

This paradox, perhaps mainly circumstantial, does contain a more substantial one. Voltaire conceded that there could be a tragic dimension to passionate love, but only if that passion was cataclysmic, far from the tired vocabulary of *galanterie*: 'Point de milieu: il faut, ou que l'amour domine en tyran, ou qu'il ne paraisse pas' (*OC* 31A, p. 403). Admittedly, his position was not always consistent: for example, in the *Commentaires sur Corneille* he contends at one point that Racine always treated love 'comme une passion funeste et tragique' (*OC* 55, p. 970), but at another, seems to admit only two instances of 'cette terrible passion' in Racine's plays (*OC* 54, p. 436). That said, more often than not he reproached Racine 'de n'avoir pas toujours mis dans cette passion toutes les fureurs tragiques dont elle est susceptible' (*OC* 55, p. 969). Not only does this judgement leave him a prisoner of 'Méré's paradox', as Carine Barbaferi has pointed out: 'les personnages tragiques qui s'expriment comme des héros de roman sont vilipendés, sans qu'on tolère pour autant un héros qui ignorerait les usages du monde.'<sup>17</sup> Voltaire's perspective is also a surprisingly narrow one, especially for an admirer of Racine. On the one hand he demanded 'une passion furieuse et terrible, et vraiment digne du théâtre' (*OC* 30A, p. 156). Yet he would not concede that this is precisely what is expressed in most of Racine's tragedies, in those very scenes, and through those same metaphors of courtly



love, that he was quick to scorn (D1074). An example, from the first act of *Andromaque* (ll. 319-20), is the way in which Pyrrhus expresses his love for his unyielding Trojan prisoner in traditional courtly terms such as *flamme* and *fers*, while threatening to kill her son if she refuses him. Since Pyrrhus has, just a year before, stabbed and torched his way through what had been *Andromaque's* homeland, these metaphors serve to illuminate the bitterly ironic association between that unbridled fury and the passion that now threatens her in a different but no less hostile way. The violence of Pyrrhus's "love" is the more unbearable for smouldering beneath the vocabulary of *galanterie*, just as the 'flamme si noire' that consumes the heroine of *Phèdre* (l. 310) expresses, in its riddling darkness, the intensity of the tragic conflict that is at the heart of the play. Thus Racine endows the language of the *salon* with a new vigour and suggestiveness by harnessing it to the energy and complexity of his rapidly unwinding plot. He creates a situation of immense peril, uncertainty, and underlying barbarity, and generates tragic emotions with the help of a language whose apparent distance from the world of suffering only increases the pain it can express. But here, as with *Hamlet*, Voltaire seemed to lose the plot.

The plot, indeed. Its crucial role highlights another striking paradox in Voltaire's approach to Racine's tragedies: his apparent lack of interest in the plays as dramatic entities. On the one hand, he was uniquely qualified to speak on the subject, as he was the first to point out: 'J'ai fait, toute ma vie, une étude assidue de l'art dramatique: cela seul m'a mis en droit de commenter les tragédies d'un grand maître' (M.xxv.226). On the other hand, he spent little time examining how Racine's plays actually worked. Racine himself, who read Greek as easily as French, was a commentator and translator of Aristotle, and his tragedies can be read as an illustration of the celebrated dictum from the *Poetics* (ch. 6) that 'tragedy is essentially an imitation not of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery'.<sup>18</sup> Voltaire, however, did not write about the dramatic action of Racine's plays, or seem to want to. His focus was on characters, and,

especially, on language. Aristotle's principles, and Racine's practice, are thus brushed aside: 'On a beaucoup et trop écrit depuis Aristote sur la tragédie. Les deux grandes règles sont que les personnages intéressent et que les vers soient bons' (D9959).

It is in this context that Voltaire maintained that the creation of what he called 'interesting' characters, such as the Burrhus of *Britannicus* or the Acomat of *Bajazet*, was a sure sign of Racine's good taste and 'génie perfectionné?' (D12075). This concentration on individual character, at the expense of the dramatic action, has always had its supporters, as readers of A. C. Bradley on Shakespeare can testify. It is nonetheless problematic. An example is Voltaire's approach to *Phèdre*. When he spoke of *Phèdre* the play, he judged it not to be 'le modèle le plus parfait' (M.xxiii.422), whereas no praise was high enough for Phèdre the character, 'd'un bout à l'autre ce qui a jamais été écrit de plus touchant et mieux travaillé' (M.xvii.406).<sup>19</sup> The problems here are multiple: Phèdre is only one character amongst many in a play that Racine entitled *Phèdre et Hippolyte*; a dramatic action is so much more than the sum of the characters, whose role is make that action present to an audience; and it is the totality of that evolving, captivating tragic action that can, as Racine expressed it in his Preface to *Iphigénie*, 'exciter la compassion et la terreur, qui sont les véritables effets de la Tragédie'. In *Phèdre* as in other tragedies, Racine used all the resources of his craft to construct a dramatic action, based on an apparently insoluble dilemma, which would work on the audience's emotions through suspense, surprise, and a final reversal. In so doing he was able to reach a pre-determined outcome in a way that could not be determined in advance, while creating a dimension of volatility, uncertainty, ambiguity, and irony, all ways of holding an audience, and moving it. Thus, for example, he achieves a significant emotional impact through his ordering of events. In *Phèdre*, one thinks of the shock produced by the unexpected return of the supposedly dead husband and father, just after his wife has declared her love for her stepson (iii, 4), or by the revelation to Phèdre of Hippolyte's love

for another woman, sparking a reaction of jealousy at the very moment she was intending to save him (iv, 5). But, apart from some occasional generalities on Racine's dramatic skill, Voltaire evinced no great interest in how Racine exploited these dramatic fundamentals, and this from the outset. Indeed, in *Le Temple du goût* he described him as 'nous attachant sans nous surprendre' (OC 9, p. 201). Visibly, Voltaire's "Racine" was not Racine the dramatist.

As always, the exception is provided by Voltaire's favourite play, *Iphigénie*. Indeed, his commentary provides a striking and somewhat wistful example of what might have been, as when he demonstrates how Racine can arouse emotion, and gradually intensify it, through the working of the dramatic machine:

Ces morceaux sont de la plus grande beauté, et d'un genre même que les anciens ne connurent jamais: ce n'est pas assez, il faut plus que de la beauté. Il faut se rendre maître du cœur par degrés, l'émouvoir, le déchirer. [...] L'intérêt, l'inquiétude, l'embarras augmentent dès la troisième scène. [...] dans cette tragédie l'intérêt s'échauffe de scène en scène. [...] Il faut savoir qu'un récit écrit par Racine est supérieur à toutes les actions théâtrales. (M.xvii.406, 412, 415)

'Il faut plus que de la beauté' is a telling phrase, or could be. It is a reprise of Aristotle's suggestion in the *Poetics* (ch. 6) that 'one may string together a series of characteristic speeches of the utmost finish as regards Diction and Thought, and yet fail to produce the true tragic effect'. This precept, enshrined in his dramatic practice, inspired Racine's aside in his Preface to *Mithridate*: 'les plus belles Scènes sont en danger d'ennuyer, du moment qu'on les peut séparer de l'Action, et qu'elles l'interrompent au lieu de la conduire vers sa fin.' This warning is an explicit refusal of the idea of including beauty for beauty's sake. In Hamlet's words, 'the play's the thing' (ii, 2), the whole dramatic action, not constituent elements such as characters or poetic

diction. The “poetry” draws its effect from the dynamism and irony of the unravelling action, that mysterious blend of unpredictability and necessity that makes us, as audience and readers, return to the same play again and again, with equal or even increased pleasure. In a poorly constructed drama, one that does not engage minds and emotions, the boldest metaphors ring hollow. But if a play works for us, it works on us, and the most ordinary of words can be charged with emotion: who can forget the ‘Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow’ of *Macbeth* (v, 5)? Ironically, no one knew this better than Voltaire himself, as a practising dramatist, and there are moments when he expresses it well. For example, he admired more than anything else the way in which, in *Iphigénie*, Agamemnon reassures his worried daughter, that she would not miss out on the grand sacrificial ceremony being prepared, in a few everyday words given an intense emotional and dramatic charge by the plot: ‘Vous y serez, ma Fille’ (M.xvii.411).<sup>20</sup> Similarly, he reminded his readers how, in one of his own tragedies, the simple words ‘Zaïre, vous pleurez’ produce a great emotional effect because of the situation in which they are uttered, one brought about by the dramatist’s skill:

Ces expressions familières et naïves tirent toute leur force de la seule manière dont elles sont amenées. *Seigneur, vous changez de visage*, n'est rien par soi-même; mais le moment où ces paroles si simples sont prononcées dans *Mithridate* fait frémir. (OC 8, p. 417)<sup>21</sup>

At least in relation to Racine’s tragedies, however, critical comments of this nature by Voltaire are exceptions that confirm the rule. In his general approach to these plays, his dictum that ‘il faut plus que de la beauté’ is one that he himself tends to overlook.

This succession of paradoxes begs an obvious question. If Voltaire criticized central elements in Racine's plays, and showed little interest in the way they are put together, on what

basis could he state that ‘Racine est un dieu qui tient le cœur des hommes dans sa main’ (*OC* 66, p. 513)? What is the identity of the god that he idolized?

Here at least the answer is unambiguous. What was simply divine for Voltaire was the beauty of Racine’s poetic diction. In an early letter he expressed this idea provocatively, asking whether Racine, considered merely on his merits as a playwright, was any different from the most plodding of his contemporaries:

Les vers de M. Racine sont pleins d’une harmonie singulière. [...] c’est la diction seule qui abaisse monsieur de Campistron au dessous de monsieur Racine. J’ai toujours soutenu que les pièces de monsieur de Campistron étaient pour le moins aussi régulièrement conduites, que toutes celles de l’illustre Racine; mais il n’y a que la poésie de style, qui fasse la perfection des ouvrages en vers. (D415)

In his valedictory *Lettre à l’Académie* of 1776, the matter was expressed differently, and with the respect that was due to an idol. But even here, while Racine’s skill as a dramatist is accepted as a given, it is clear that Voltaire’s interest lies elsewhere:

Je ne parle pas de l’artifice imperceptible des poèmes de Racine, de son grand art de conduire une tragédie, de renouer l’intérêt par des moyens délicats, de tirer un acte entier d’un seul sentiment; je ne parle que de l’art d’écrire. (M.vii.326)

In other words, from beginning to end Voltaire did not waste much time discussing Racine’s tragedies as dramatic artefacts. To his use of language, on the other hand, he gave the meticulous attention of an admirer seeking only to explain the depth of his admiration:

Il le faut avouer, on ne faisait point de tels vers avant Racine: non seulement personne ne savait la route du cœur, mais presque personne ne savait les finesses de la versification, cet art de rompre la mesure: 'Je le vis: son aspect n'avait rien de farouche.' Personne ne connaissait cet heureux mélange de syllabes longues et brèves, et de consonnes suivies de voyelles qui font couler un vers avec tant de mollesse, et qui le font entrer dans une oreille sensible et juste avec tant de plaisir. (M.xvii.409)<sup>22</sup>

As the century unfolded, Voltaire expressed with ever greater intensity his sense of wonder at the unique and magical way in which the poet Racine used the resources of the French language to create 'une diction toujours pure, toujours naturelle et auguste, souvent sublime' (*OC* 66, p. 505), and this to the point of contending that the best works of French prose were those that most faithfully imitated Racine's style (M.vii.329). This sense of awe was all the greater because Racine had been able to overcome all the constraints that poetic form places on natural expression, without ever giving the impression that the slightest obstacle existed:

Je dois ajouter à cet extrême mérite d'émouvoir pendant cinq actes, le mérite plus rare, et moins senti, de vaincre pendant cinq actes la difficulté de la rime et de la mesure, au point de ne pas laisser échapper une seule ligne, un seul mot qui sente la moindre gêne, quoiqu'on ait été continuellement gêné. (M.vii.333)<sup>23</sup>

"Racine", therefore, was above all else for Voltaire 'celui de nos poètes qui approcha le plus de la perfection' (M.vii.326), someone who had been able, as no one before or since, to express emotions in a music of unparalleled simplicity, beauty, and grace. This sense of poetic perfection

is not some vaguely abstract notion. For Voltaire, what distinguished Racine from all others was the magical way in which he used the resources of the language to express emotion: ‘Il fut le premier et longtemps le seul qui alla au cœur par l’oreille’ (D20453). Indeed, the more Voltaire meditated on this exceptional gift, the less anything else in the long run really seemed to matter, as he seemed to sum up a whole lifetime of comments in his *Lettre à l’Académie*: ‘Que la sévérité blâme Racine tant qu’elle voudra, le cœur vous ramènera toujours à ses pièces’ (M.vii.332).

In other words, the mistakes made by Racine the dramatist were redeemed by the poet who was, for Voltaire, the essential “Racine”. This was a theme to which he returned with some insistence: ‘Malgré le vice du sujet, trente vers d’*Esther* valent mieux que beaucoup de tragédies qui ont eu de grand succès’ (M.xiv.475). Racine the playwright may have diluted the tragic dimension of his plays with poor plots, unsatisfactory characters, and Court *galanteries*. In the end, however, these were small matters for which Racine the poet could be forgiven, because of his unparalleled poetic genius:

Je sais bien que Racine est rarement assez tragique; mais il est si intéressant, si adroit, si pur, si élégant, si harmonieux, il a tant adouci et embelli notre langue rendue barbare par Corneille que notre passion pour lui est bien excusable. (D14054)

Thus, after detailing some flaws in *Phèdre*, Voltaire admitted that ‘tous ces défauts sont, à la vérité, ornés d’une diction si pure et si touchante que je ne les trouve pas des défauts quand je lis la pièce’ (M.xvii.406). Even plays that he had ridiculed, such as *Bérénice*, could not be read without emotion and rapture, such was the overwhelming poetic power he felt Racine to exert:

On a prétendu que cette uniformité de petites intrigues aurait trop avili les pièces de cet aimable poète s'il n'avait pas su couvrir cette faiblesse de tous les charmes de la poésie, des grâces de sa diction, de la douceur de son éloquence sage, et de toutes les ressources de son art. (M.xxiv.218)

Dans le siècle passé, il n'y eut que le seul Racine qui écrivit des tragédies avec une pureté et une élégance presque continue; le charme de cette élégance a été si puissant que les gens de lettres et de goût lui ont pardonné la monotonie de ses déclarations d'amour, et la faiblesse de quelques caractères, en faveur de sa diction enchanteresse. [...] Et d'où vient que la Bérénice de Racine se fait lire avec tant de plaisir, à quelques larmes près? d'où vient qu'elle arrache des larmes? C'est que les vers sont bons. Ce mot comprend tout, sentiment, vérité, décence, naturel, pureté de diction, noblesse, force, harmonie, élégance, idées profondes, idées fines, surtout idées claires, images touchantes, images terribles. Otez ce mérite à la divine tragédie d'Athalie, il ne lui reste rien. (D9959)<sup>24</sup>

These examples could be multiplied. Their effect has endured. Though Racine was a very practical dramatist who wrote plays, in rivalry with others, in order to engage with a live audience, to hold it and to move it on the night, Voltaire increasingly removed his tragedies from the contingencies of the theatre, and transformed them into a poetic essence, the ideal Racine presented to the readers of *Le Siècle de Louis XIV* as 'toujours élégant, toujours correct, toujours vrai', and 'toujours beau' (M.xiv.548).<sup>25</sup> Voltaire's "Racine" thus became an ideal linguistic and poetic form: 'Je ne sais même si la langue française est susceptible d'une perfection supérieure à celle que Racine lui a donnée' (D12388); 'Personne n'a jamais porté l'art de la parole à un plus haut point, ni donné plus de charme à la langue française' (D13233).



Given Voltaire's immense authority in the eighteenth century and after, it seems reasonable to suggest that his particular image of Racine had a considerable influence on future reception. Paul Valéry is only the most prestigious example of critics who have focused on Racine's language at the expense of his plays. More discreetly, perhaps, Voltaire's creation of an ideal, closed form helped to transform Racine's tragedies into "Racine", a uniform object, *calme bloc ici-bas chu*, a set of static constituents fixed for eternity. Paradoxically again, therefore, whatever Voltaire's own distrust of explanatory systems, Roland Barthes's *homme racinien*, and other such attempts to see the plays in terms of tragic essences and overarching structures, might well be traced back, if perhaps slightly puckishly, to this eighteenth-century de-dramatization and fossilization. It seems fitting that the epithet *racinien*, which in its first use was anodyne, should have been coined by Voltaire himself in 1763.<sup>26</sup>

This date serves as an introduction to a final paradox. For as the century progressed, the more vigorously Voltaire promoted this "Racine", the more the tragedies of Racine became negative stereotypes for a new generation impatient of the old. The debunking process was not helped by Voltaire's exploitation of the brand he had created. In the final decades of his life he tended increasingly to turn his narrow vision of Racine's tragedies into a weapon in an ideological war: the military metaphors are his own.<sup>27</sup> While working on the *Commentaires sur Corneille*, Voltaire first used his "Racine", often somewhat wryly, to put down Corneille, but then employed this weapon, with increasing acerbity, to combat the increasing popularity of Shakespeare in France. This well-documented process reached its culmination in 1776, with the *Lettre à l'Académie*. Voltaire's premise, as expressed for example in *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*, was that the arts in general, and literature in particular, had gone downhill since that golden age. Since the French language had fulfilled its highest potential at that time, in works such as the *Lettres*

*provinciales* of 1654, any movement from this fixed point became synonymous with a retreat from good taste (M.xiv.541).

Even at our distance from the event, the blinkered and obsessive nature of this rearguard action can still surprise. It was to serve this cause that Voltaire used “Racine”. He brandished this icon in the face of the barbarian hordes as a banner of civility, propriety, order, harmony, balance, and natural simplicity. Indeed, when he did get down to examining one of Racine's plays, *Iphigénie*, it was for militant purposes that he made the exception: to show up, by comparison, the crudity, clumsiness, and lack of propriety to be found in *Hamlet*. Since he had little confidence in the French public as such, ‘un people ignorant et faible, qui a besoin d’être conduit par le petit nombre d’hommes éclairés’ (D11781), he felt it was the task of writers, like good soldiers, to fight the good fight. From the great ironist the military metaphors soon became religious ones, but without any great sense of irony: if the age of Louis XIV was a temple of good taste, language was its sanctuary, containing the ‘feu sacré’ that it was the duty of writers to protect (M.vii.329).<sup>28</sup> It is no surprise that Voltaire's “Racine” should be found at the very heart of this sacred fire. He ended up by speaking of the Shakespearian invasion in apocalyptic terms, with his “Racine” as the one salvation: ‘C’en est fait, le monde va finir, l’antéchrist est venu’ (D17900), ‘L’abomination de la désolation est dans le Temple du Seigneur’ (D20232), ‘Sans Racine, point de salut’ (D20453). And so Voltaire ended up holding defiantly aloft, in the one true church of his good taste, this most iconic symbol of the “classical” aesthetic, at the very moment when the iconoclasts were gathering, and looking for suitable targets.

The outcome is history. Shakespeare became ‘l’emblème romantique par excellence, une façon de congédier Racine’.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the very term *romantique* comes from the Preface to Le Tourneur’s 1776 translation of Shakespeare’s complete works, against which Voltaire promoted his “Racine” as the better way.<sup>30</sup> But, as we have seen, though Voltaire was partial to Racine, so

his image of his works was partial too. For Racine's tragedies are, first and foremost, what the playwright intended them to be, artefacts crafted to arouse the emotions of an audience, and to be enjoyed as dramatic experiences. Many have a dramatic action alive with potential and movement, charged with uncertainty, irony, and surprise, in Seamus Heaney's fine phrase (paradoxically describing the good poem), 'a site of energy and tension and possibility'.<sup>31</sup> These are qualities that come to life in different performances, or with different readers, since Racine's tragedies are always open to conflicting interpretations. Voltaire, as the commanding critical authority of the century, in essence deformed these works by choosing to ignore their dramatic core, and then transformed them into a static object, "Racine", that became a model, and was then used as an ideological weapon in a war he was very quickly going to lose. To some extent, the tragedies of Racine were collateral damage. What remained after the battle was the language, the poetry, but seen as possessing a kind of icy perfection no one could attain, or would want to, at a distance that did not lend enchantment. After all, if Victor Hugo considered that Racine was a 'divin poète' who was not worth consideration as a dramatist, was he not running along a highway opened up by Voltaire?<sup>32</sup> And if Théophile Gauthier quipped that you could reject the Monarchy, the Family, and the Deity, but not attempt the slightest criticism of Racine, was the satire not directed at the national monument that Voltaire, with so little sense of irony, had done so much to create?<sup>33</sup>

One can always speculate on the extent of Voltaire's influence as a literary critic. In the case of Racine's tragedies at least, it seems likely that his evisceration of the drama from the dramatist, and his creation and adoration of an object of linguistic perfection, helped to turn these intense, tricky, and ambiguous plays into those dusty exhibits in the museum of French classicism that they so often have become, part of the grand heritage tour undertaken by students and schoolchildren, and often forgotten thereafter. Voltaire's adoration thus underwent an

Aristotelian reversal of intention worthy of Racine's finest tragedies. The warmth of his admiration for the poet turned out to be, for the playwright, a cold and almost mortal embrace. A paradox indeed.

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<sup>1</sup> See Arnold Ages, 'Voltaire on Racine: the testimony of the correspondence', *Zeitschrift für Französische Sprache und Literatur*, 78 (1968), 289-301; Robert Lowenstein, *Voltaire as an Historian of Seventeenth-Century French Drama* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1935); Emile Kostoroski, 'The Eagle and the Dove', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth-Century*, 155 (1972), 95-142; Adam Stepnowski, 'Voltaire, Racine et la Tragédie', in *Continuités et ruptures dans l'histoire de la littérature*, ed. by Michèle Weil, Halina Suwala, and Dominique Triare (Paris: Slatkine, 1989), pp. 70-79; R. S. Ridgway, 'Athalie vue par Voltaire', *Jeunesse de Racine* (1969), 108-17; David Williams, 'Voltaire et le tragique racinien', *La Réception de Racine à l'âge classique: de la scène au monument*, ed. by Nicholas Cronk and Alain Viala, SVEC 2005: 08 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2005), 121-32 (there is a degree of congruence between some pages of this article and that of Ridgway). Unless stated otherwise, references to the works of

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Voltaire, normally given in the text, are to the following: Voltaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by L. Moland (Paris, 1877-85), henceforth M; Voltaire, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Theodore Besterman (Oxford 1968- ), henceforth OC; *Correspondence and related documents*, vols. 85-135 of the OC, henceforth D followed by the number of the letter. References to Racine's plays are to the following edition: Jean Racine, *Théâtre, Poésie*, ed. by Georges Forestier, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> On Racine as supposedly "classical", see John Campbell, *Questioning Racinian Tragedy* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), pp. 20-21, and the works cited here. On Voltaire's role in establishing the "classics" of French literature, see Alain Viala, 'L'Institution littéraire dans *Le Siècle de Louis XIV*', in *Voltaire et le Grand Siècle*, ed. by Jean Dagen and Anne-Sophie Barrovecchio, SVEC 2006 :10 (Oxford : Voltaire Foundation, 2006), pp. 193-204.

<sup>3</sup> *Voltaire: literary critic*, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth-Century*, 48 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 1966), pp. 19 and 25. On the primacy of pleasure and emotion in seventeenth-century tragedy, see Georges Forestier, *Passions tragiques et règles classiques* (Paris: PUF, 2003), p. 197.

<sup>4</sup> Campbell, p. 29. On Racine's plays as 'des expériences, aussi différentes entre elles que possibles', see Forestier's Introduction to his edition of Racine, *Théâtre*, p. xxxviii.

<sup>5</sup> A calculation made by Ages, p. 289.

<sup>6</sup> 'Remarques sur *Bérénice*', in *Commentaires sur Corneille*, OC 55, pp. 938-61. On *Athalie*, see Kostoroski, p. 180, and Ridgway, p. 110: '*Athalie* est devenue pour Voltaire une arme de guerre contre le fanatisme.'

<sup>7</sup> Ages, p. 301.

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<sup>8</sup> See La Bruyère, *Les Caractères* (Paris: Union Générale d'Éditions, 1963), p. 48, and Voltaire, 'Lettre de M. de la Visclède', M.xxxi.325. On Voltaire's suspicion of 'critical superficiality', see Williams, *Voltaire: literary critic*, p. 118. On the influence of seventeenth-century views of Racine in the following century, see Jean-Jacques Roubine, *Lectures de Racine* (Paris: Armand Colin, 1971), p. 41.

<sup>9</sup> 'Chapitre des Arts', *Essai sur les mœurs*, ed. by René Pomeau, 2 vols (Paris, Garnier, 1963), II, 855.

<sup>10</sup> On Voltaire's following of accepted opinions as a literary critic, see Lowenstein, p. 147, and (specifically on *Athalie*) Ridgway, p. 111.

<sup>11</sup> Ages, p. 290.

<sup>12</sup> See Williams, 'Voltaire et le tragique racinien', p. 122: 'en 1764, l'année de la publication de sa grande édition du théâtre de Corneille, une critique tout à fait négative, même de la galanterie racinienne, est difficile à trouver.'

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>14</sup> 'Discours de l'utilité et des parties du poème dramatique', in Corneille, *Writings on the Theatre*, ed. by H. T. Barnwell (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), p. 8.

<sup>15</sup> Corneille, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. by Georges Couton, 3 tomes, Bibliothèque de la Pléiade (Paris: Gallimard, 1980-87), III, 726.

<sup>16</sup> See for example René Rapin, *Réflexions sur la poétique*, ed. by Elfrieda Dubois (Geneva: Droz, 1970), p. 103.

<sup>17</sup> Carine Barbaferri, 'Voltaire et le théâtre tragique du 17<sup>e</sup> siècle', in *Voltaire et le Grand Siècle*, ed. by Jean Dagen and Anne-Sophie Barrovecchio, SVEC 2006:10 (Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, 2006), pp. 223-35 (p. 223).

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<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, *The Art of Poetry*, trans. by Ingram Bywater (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967). On Racine's tragedies as a 'méditation perpétuelle' on Aristotle, see Jérôme Lecompte, 'Racine et la vraisemblance à l'âge classique. Statut de la rhétorique chez René Rapin et Jean Racine', *L'Information littéraire*, 60.1 (2008), 58-64 (p. 63).

<sup>19</sup> See also *OC* 55, p. 969. On the difference between *Phèdre* and Phèdre, see Campbell, pp. 211-15.

<sup>20</sup> Racine, *Iphigénie*, 578. On Diderot's admiration for the same phrase, and for another window on the reception of Racine in the eighteenth century, see Derek Connon, 'Diderot and Racine', in *En marge du classicisme*, ed. by Alan Howe and Richard Waller (Liverpool: University of Liverpool Press, 1987), pp. 243-62 (p. 254).

<sup>21</sup> Racine, *Mithridate*, 1112.

<sup>22</sup> The quotation is from *Iphigénie*, l. 497.

<sup>23</sup> See also the *Essai sur les mœurs*, II, 855.

<sup>24</sup> The same passage occurs in *Fragment d'un discours historique et critique*, M.vii.256.

<sup>25</sup> Note Williams, 'Voltaire et le tragique racinien', p. 125: 'En fait, le talent de Racine ne consistait au fond qu'en un talent linguistique et stylistique plus facile à admirer à la lecture qu'au théâtre.'

<sup>26</sup> 'La Bérénice racinienne', in D11253. This date is provided by the *Trésor de la langue française*, vol. 14 (Paris: Gallimard, 1990). Note in a letter from 1776 (D20453) a reference suggesting that the same term now implies a set of aesthetic qualities: 'une très jolie petite créature, et qui me parut toute Racinienne.'

<sup>27</sup> As in his letter to Necker in 1776 (D20331): 'Je suis assez comme ceux qu'on appelle les insurgens d'Amérique, je ne veux point être l'esclave des Anglais.'

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<sup>28</sup> See also D12070.

<sup>29</sup> B. Leuillot, Introduction to Victor Hugo, *William Shakespeare* (Paris: Flammarion, 1973), p. 5.

<sup>30</sup> P. Le Tourneur, *Préface du Shakespeare traduit de l'anglais*, Paris, 1776, ed. by J. Gury (Genève, Droz, 1990).

<sup>31</sup> 'To set the darkness echoing', *Guardian*, 8 November 2008, Review section, p. 2.

<sup>32</sup> 'Préface de *Cromwell*', in Hugo, *Théâtre*, 6 vols (Paris: Hachette, 1858), I, 28.

<sup>33</sup> See Francis Lagarde, 'La valeur et l'effet de nature. Réception de Racine après la Révolution', *Papers on French Seventeenth-Century Literature*, 29 (2002), 117-34 (p. 119).